

ECA Update June 2, 2016

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Obama admin weighs overhaul of troubled cleanup office

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June 1, 2016

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This story was updated at 2 p.m. EDT.

The Obama administration wants to reorganize a critical office within the Department of Energy that has been plagued by high-profile leaks of radioactive waste, contractor problems, missed deadlines and ballooning cleanup costs, according to documents obtained by *Greenwire*.

DOE officials are proposing to reconfigure the Office of Environmental Management's headquarters, which has offices in Washington, D.C., and Maryland, to focus on regulatory and policy affairs, field operations, and business operations, Environmental Management Assistant Secretary Monica Regalbuto and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Mark Whitney said in a May 26 [presentation](#).

DOE officials said the proposal, which was submitted to the National Treasury Employees Union last month, would not affect employees' pay or lead to any

Upcoming Events

June 2016

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Meeting
Boston, MA

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June 2016

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Senate resumes floor action of FY17
NDAA.
House possibly resumes floor action
of FY17 NDAA.

June 2016

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House Nuclear Cleanup Caucus
Capitol Hill

June 2016

workers being downgraded. But some workers could shift focus or take up new roles. The union is currently reviewing the proposal under a collective bargaining agreement with DOE, agency officials said.

"Discussions regarding this reorganization are ongoing," a spokesman for the agency said in a statement. "No reduction-in-force, pay reductions, or downgrades for EM employees would result from the proposed reorganization."

Regalbuto, who has been said to have "the toughest job in federal government," wants to boost information-sharing between EM headquarters and the various field offices operating under the EM umbrella in states like Idaho, Washington, New Mexico, Ohio, Georgia and Tennessee.

The changes would organize the office into three sectors, freeing Regalbuto and Whitney to strategize, according to a DOE official. Up until now, Whitney has directly managed eight field operations.

The Office of Environmental Management currently oversees the largest environmental cleanup program in the world -- 107 legacy sites large enough to cover Rhode Island and Delaware combined -- left over from decades of nuclear weapons development and government-sponsored nuclear energy research. To date, the office says it has cleaned up 90 of the sites.

There are currently 1,400 federal employees across the EM complex, with about 110 stationed at the office's Germantown, Md., office and about 160 in the Forrestal Building in Washington, D.C.

Regalbuto pointed to a number of external and internal drivers that fueled the agency's decision to reorganize the office in her presentation.

That includes a DOE report that found a radioactive leak at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a premier federal waste storage site in New Mexico, could have been prevented with proper oversight of operations. After reviewing the Feb. 14, 2014, release of radiation at WIPP, an independent board appointed by DOE found that the leak was "preventable" and that Los Alamos National Laboratory, which ships

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Oak Ridge EMSSAB Meeting

June 2016

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Paducah EM SSAB Meeting

August 2016

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Third Annual
Intermountain
Energy Summit
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September 2016

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September 2016

14-15

2016 National Cleanup Workshop

nuclear waste to the site, did not implement the proper packing and treatment procedures for its waste ([E&ENews PM](#), April 16).

Investigators found one drum to be the cause of the leak. It was packed with sWheat Scoop, an organic cat litter that set off a chemical reaction, popping off the drum's lid and releasing radiation.

DOE officials said the creation of one office for field operations would provide more consistency so the entire EM complex can learn and implement lessons from events like the WIPP leak.

Regalbuto also pointed to the Government Accountability Office's biannual "High-Risk List," a [report](#) that cast a critical light on DOE's oversight and management of contractors, citing missed deadlines and ballooning cost estimates for a host of projects.

The overhaul would address those concerns by removing duplication within the office. Ralph Holland, director of EM's Consolidated Business Center in Cincinnati, for example, would also oversee acquisitions and project management under the proposed reconfiguration, according to DOE.

Another driver was a sweeping DOE document released in February that found "broken" relationships between the national labs and the agency ([E&E Daily](#), Feb. 25).

The report was written by a congressionally mandated commission that found distrust between DOE and the labs is inhibiting their performance, despite their many successes and "great value" to the nation. The Commission to Review the Effectiveness of the National Energy Laboratories released its final report last year after 18 months of analysis.

Along those lines, EM has faced mounting pressure from the New Mexico Environment Department to clean up decades of hazardous waste at Los Alamos National Laboratory ([Greenwire](#), March 31). State Environment Secretary Ryan

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November 2016

16-18

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Intergovernmental Meeting
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Flynn earlier said DOE was moving too slow and offered up a "complete overhaul" of a previous agreement with the agency aimed at expediting cleanup at the lab. Regalbuto, who has said she wants to leverage technology developed by other agencies to support cleanup efforts, is also proposing the creation of a technology development office.

"If NASA can put rovers on Mars, we should be able to put a robot into some of our most hazardous, challenging environments," Regalbuto said at the first EM workshop last October.
